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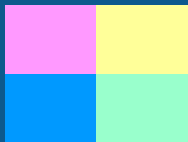
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The Koran Unveiled

[Attila Romenian](#)

Questions:

1. Does the Koran really call for war against non-Muslims?
2. Does it really sanction domestic violence and say women have to obey men?
3. Does it really mandate women to cover up from head to toe?
4. Are Muslim men really promised virgins and wine in paradise?
5. Does the Koran really endorse martyrdom?
6. Does it mandate public flogging, cutting off hands and stoning to death?
7. Does the Koran really back a Taliban-style ban on anything but religious music?
8. Islamic tradition forbids portraying Mohamed, Allah, human beings generally and even animals (some Muslims do not even allow their children to play with dolls because they represent human beings), but does the Koran actually mandate this?

Answers:

1. Yes, and quite emphatically.
2. Literally so.
3. The Koran leaves this up to local custom, but it does not explicitly mandate women to cover any part of their body except the breasts.
4. That, and comely boys as well.
5. Although the term "martyrdom" only appears once, the Koran does advance the notion.
6. It mandates public flogging for adultery and cutting off hands for stealing, but not stoning to death (not for adultery nor for any other offense).
7. No, not at all. In fact, the Koran does not even mention music.
8. No, there is nothing to the effect in the entire book.

Looking Away

Even though radical Islam is spreading, not much is known about the Koran in Western countries, and there seems to be an unwillingness to have a closer look at the book. Yet without this, informed discussion is not possible, and what debate does take place is no more than an exchange of opinion and ignorance. Amongst other things, the Koran is said to call for holy war (*jihad*) and sanction domestic violence, but when asked about this, Muslims and Western apologists flatly deny it and one cannot rebut them without precise quotes. They maintain that the Koran does not preach violence, only compassion and justice (and one should well ask *whose* justice), yet the book they defend does not support their claims. Likewise, in April 2004 there was outrage in France when Algerian imam Abdelkader Bouziane advocated wife-beating on the grounds that the Koran sanctioned it. Other imams hurriedly disputed his claim, but in point of fact, the man was right: The Koran not only sanctions domestic violence, it recommends it (Sura 4:34, see below).

Read the Koran, they say. I have. And I cut through the litany to point out a number of disturbing passages. Each quote is referenced by the number of the line where it begins. The numbering may at times be slightly off since in the English translation I used (Dawood, 1974), verse numbers were placed only at the head, middle and foot of each page, making it necessary to count up or down from the nearest verse number for quotes in between. As it was, the verse numbers were placed for reference to the Arabic, so that numbers in the English text did not always add up. Even so, they are fairly accurate and the quotes should be found readily enough.

It may be objected that I cite passages out of context, that much in the Koran is open to interpretation and that one can choose how to read a given passage. A brief perusal of the text surrounding the respective passages will show that I have not taken things out of context. I would add that things can only be taken out of context if there is a context they can be taken out of, but this is often not the case with the Koran. There is no thematic structure and the suras ramble on, skipping from one topic to another, their titles bearing little relation to the content. For example, Sura 5 (The Table) has 120 lines and is some 14 pages long. A paragraph of sketchy dietary guidelines is followed by a reminder not to violate the rites of Allah and another on piety. The fourth paragraph contains some more dietary rules, the fifth is a quick reminder not to settle disputes by violence. The following two paragraphs are about unbelievers and Islam, the next two mix diet and religion, there is a general paragraph about what is good for Muslims, followed by another about women, a two-sentence paragraph about losing faith, a longer one about rudimentary hygiene, and the rest of the sura--some 12 pages--consists of Biblical stories, tirades against Jews and Christians, platitudes about reward and punishment in the afterlife, etc. This is typical of the Koran, which otherwise is replete with inconsistencies and contradictions: Allah is referred to in the first and the third person in the same sentence, different versions of the same story are repeated at different places in the text, and divine rulings occasionally contradict each other. But more about that later.

Last but not least, it is often argued that when reading the Koran, one should make allowance for overstatement and hyperbole. That may well be so. However, if one accepts this argument, then how much else of the Koran should one dismiss as florid style and forceful metaphor? Besides, hyperbole or not, many Muslims the world over take the Koran as the literal truth.

I have written this exposition to bring some things out into the open and to stimulate much-needed discussion. The issues raised here ought to be addressed openly and publicly--in the West and in Muslim countries alike. So get a copy of the Koran at your library or bookstore and see for yourself.

What is the Koran?

Mohamed, the Unlettered Prophet (Sura 7:158), was illiterate and never learned how to read. Thus he was unable to verify himself if everything was written down the way he had dictated it.

Never have you [Mohamed] read a book before this, nor have you ever transcribed one with your right hand.
- Sura 29:48

At first, Mohamed dictated the Koranic verses in intervals to professional remembrancers. Some time later, the verses were written down on palm leaves, stones and whatever else was at hand. The collection was "completed" during the caliphate of Umar (634-644, Mohamed having died in 632) and an authorized version established during the caliphate of Uthman (644-656). It is likely that during this early period of Islamic expansion, compilation of the Koran was rushed to meet imperial pressures and earlier copies were destroyed (Lester, 1999). In putting together the official version, no chronological order was observed, suras being arranged in descending order of length (i.e., from longest to shortest). Also, since the kufic script in which the Koran was first jotted down had no vowels or diacritics, there are variant readings of equal authority (Dawood, 1974). This is the Koran which millions the world over see as a perfect and holy book containing the absolute truth, "set down on honored pages, purified and exalted, by the hands of devout and gracious scribes" (Sura 80:15).

Yet it is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. One can open the Koran on any page and find Allah speaking both in the singular and in the plural, this despite the great stress which Islam places on

absolute monotheism. Likewise, different versions of the same story are repeated at different places in the text. Also, divine rulings contradict each other, such as the Koran's stance on violence between Muslims: One sura warns believers not to kill each other--killing non-Muslims or Muslims seen as hypocrites would apparently be fine--while another calls for an-eye-for-an-eye retaliation (notice the priorities in listing women after slaves).

It is unlawful for a believer to kill another believer except by accident. ... He that kills a believer by design shall burn in Hell forever.

- Sura 4:92,93

Believers, retaliation is decreed for you in bloodshed: a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave, and a female for a female.

- Sura 2:178

Alcohol is strictly off-limits for Muslims, yet the Koran contains a passage addressing drunk praying in a surprisingly matter-of-fact tone, and elsewhere even gives the impression that alcohol is good.

Believers, do not approach your prayers when you are drunk, but wait till you can grasp the meaning of your words ...

- Sura 4:43

We [Allah] give to you the fruits of the palm and of the vine, from which you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for men of understanding.

- Sura 16:67

These together with many other inconsistencies--such as creation taking both six and eight days to complete (see <http://www.answering-islam.org/Quran/Contra> for further examples)--strongly suggest that the Koran was put together and edited over time, and by different persons as well. Even so, no orthodox Muslim would edit or change it in any way, which, for that matter, is forbidden:

Perfectured are the words of your Lord in truth and justice. None can change them.

- Sura 6:115

Proclaim what is revealed to you in the Book of your Lord. None may change His words.

- Sura 18:26

During restorations of the Great Mosque at Sana'a in 1972, Koranic texts from the seventh and eighth century (the Yemeni fragments) were found, revealing earlier versions of the Koran. In places, the text even shows traces of a previous text which was erased before the final text was written over it. Evidence is mounting that the Koran was written and edited over time. The prospect looks very interesting indeed. In the meantime, however, there is a Koran which is believed now, and that is what we have to deal with.

Sword and Fire

We have to keep hitting people until they say, "There is no God but Allah and Mohamed is His prophet."

- Osama Bin Laden

Historically speaking, we are seeing the Islamic equivalent of the Crusades. Then as now, religious fanatics sought to overthrow a technologically and economically more-advanced civilization. The Crusaders failed, their attacks no more than pinpricks and their only lasting mark a body of legend. Arabia did not become Christian then, and the West is not going to embrace Islam now.

The word *islam* means surrender, in the spiritual as well as in the military sense. The former is the preferred interpretation for those who would reassure others of the essentially peaceful nature of Islam. Yet even a cursory reading of the Koran will make it plain that violence and militancy--"victory or martyrdom" (Sura 9:52)--are part and parcel of the religion. Most of the Koran

consists of stern admonitions and browbeating repeated at great length, the threatening, bullying tone reminiscent of the extreme violence and killing that go on in the Middle East every day.

Muslims tend to keep to themselves, uncomfortable as they often are with Western openness and thinking. Yet even if you get to know them better, there will always be that religious barrier. Tolerant and open-minded as they may consider themselves, Muslims would find it hard to regard non-Muslims as their equals since "idolaters are unclean" (Sura 9:18) and the Koran has explicit warnings against befriending non-Muslims, whom it persistently demonizes as ignorant, stubborn, deceitful infidels.

Believers, do not choose the infidels rather than the faithful for your friends. Would you give Allah a clear proof against yourselves?

- Sura 4:145

Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends [or choose them as your allies or protectors].

- Sura 5:51

As for the unbelievers, whether you forewarn them or not, they will not have faith.

- Sura 2:6

In preaching to the unbelievers, the Apostle may be compared to one who calls on beasts that can hear nothing except a shout and a cry. Deaf, dumb and blind, they understand nothing.

- Sura 2:170

The Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was no more than Allah's apostle and His Words which He conveyed to Mary: a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His apostles and do not say: "Three." [meaning the Holy Trinity]

- Sura 4:171

The Jews say Ezra is the son of Allah, while the Christians say the Messiah is the son of Allah. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old. Allah confound them! How perverse they are! They worship their rabbis and their monks, and the Messiah son of Mary, as gods besides Allah; though they were ordered to serve one God only.

- Sura 9:30-31

Do you see those that have befriended a people [the Jews] with whom Allah is angry? ... They knowingly swear to falsehoods ... They use their faith as a disguise and debar others from the path of Allah ... They are liars all.

- Sura 58:14,15,16,18

Commandments such as these do not exactly favor integration of Muslims into other cultures. Religion is not democracy. Indeed, many communities in the Muslim diaspora contain militant elements which not only resist integration, but seek to Islamicize Western countries and turn them into theocracies--just as the Koran mandates.

The Koran's stance against non-Muslims also suggests that any good done by unbelievers, no matter how great, would be voided by their refusal of Islam. It also makes it easy to see non-Muslims as enemies because theirs or an allied government deployed troops or a humanitarian mission in a Muslim country. Either way they would be enemies, though, since the Koran requires Muslims to go to war against the infidels; particularly Jews and Christians, "the unbelievers amongst the People of the Book" (Sura 98:1).

Fighting is obligatory for you, much as you dislike it.

- Sura 2:216

The unbelievers are your sworn enemies ... Seek out your enemies relentlessly.

- Sura 4:101,104

Unbelievers are those who declare: "Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary" ... Those that

make war against Allah and His apostle and spread disorder in the land shall be put to death or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, or be banished from the country.

- Sura 5:17,33

Make war on them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion reigns supreme.

- Sura 8:39

... slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and be in ambush everywhere for them.

- Sura 9:5

Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given as believe in neither Allah nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what Allah and His apostle have forbidden and do not embrace the true faith until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued.

- Sura 9:29

Whether unarmed or well-equipped, march on and fight for the cause of Allah, with your wealth and your persons.

- Sura 9:41

Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you.

- Sura 9:123

When you meet the unbelievers in the battle-field, strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly.

- Sura 47:4

Believers! ... Have faith in Allah and His apostle and fight for His cause with your wealth and your persons.

- Sura 61:10

And Noah said: "Lord, do not leave a single unbeliever in the land. If you spare them, they will beget none but sinners and unbelievers ... Forgive all the faithful, men and women, and hasten the destruction of the wrongdoers."

- Sura 71:26

The stress on militancy can hardly be overlooked. The term "martyrdom" (automatic passage to heaven if one dies fighting the infidels) appears rarely--I found the word only once (Sura 9:52)--but the Koran definitely advances the notion itself. The passages in Sura 3:157-158, 3:169 and 9:111 are usually taken to support the belief that martyrs are guaranteed immediate ascension to paradise.

Those that fled their homes or were expelled from them, and those that suffered persecution and fought and died for My cause, shall be forgiven their sins and admitted to gardens watered by running streams, as a reward from Allah ...

- Sura 3:195

Allah has purchased of the faithful their lives and worldly goods and in return has promised them the Garden. They will fight for His cause, slay and be slain ... Each loss they suffer at the enemy's hands shall be counted as a good deed in the sight of Allah ...

- Sura 9:111,120

As for those that have fled their homes for the cause of Allah and afterwards died or were slain, Allah will make a generous provision for them.

- Sura 22:58

In addition to inciting war against non-Muslims, the Koran also condemns inaction and unwillingness to fight.

The believers who stay at home--apart from those that suffer from a grave impediment--

are not equal to those who fight for the cause of Allah with their goods and their persons.
- Sura 4:95

Believers, when you encounter the armies of the infidels, do not turn your backs to them in flight. If anyone on that day turns his back on them, except it be for tactical reasons, or to join another band, he shall incur the wrath of Allah and Hell shall be his home: an evil fate.
- Sura 8:16

The second passage refers to the time when Mohamed went to war against Mecca after he was run out of the city, but it is easily read as a general statement, all the more in the context of the rest of the Koran. By contrast, calls for tolerance in a more live-and-let-live tone are few and short.

There shall be no compulsion in religion.
- Sura 2:256

Say: "Unbelievers, I do not serve what you worship, nor do you serve what I worship. I shall never serve what you worship, nor will you ever serve what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine."
- Sura 109 (entire text)

The Koran does say, "Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not attack them first" (Sura 2:190). However, an attack may be perceived where none occurred, especially by those who intend to right what they see as an old injustice.

Muslims are not much better off, either. Even simple human compassion is at odds with the stern teachings of Islam.

... give sustenance to the poor man, the orphan and the captive, saying: "We feed you for Allah's sake only; ..."
- Sura 76:7

... the good man who purifies himself by alms-giving ... and he that does good works for the sake of the Most High only ...
- Sura 92:18,20

The message is clear: The human being counts for nothing and one should not have compassion for others out of sheer sympathy. The poor and orphans are but means for improving one's standing with Allah. Muslim media are ready to pillory the USA and other Western countries, but seldom condemn carnage inflicted by Muslims on other Muslims. Similarly, at every major natural catastrophe it is the much-maligned West that has to step in because humanitarian relief and assistance do not seem to be a high priority, not even when it comes to their own people. Indeed, a reason commonly given in West Africa for converting to Christianity is that Muslims don't help each other. This is hardly surprising. Love of one's fellows is not mentioned once in the Koran. On the contrary, it even cautions Muslims against their own wives and children.

Know that your children and your worldly goods are but a temptation, and that Allah's reward is great.
- Sura 8:28

Wealth and children are the ornaments of this life.
- Sura 18:46

Believers, you have an enemy in your wives and children: beware of them ... Your wealth and children are but a temptation. Allah's reward is great.
- Sura 64:14,15

One wonders how many Muslims feel weak and guilty because of the natural affection they have for their mates and little ones. Love may be nipped in the bud. Needless to say, girls fare worse than boys here. This dehumanizing of the family surely helps explain how people can train children for suicide

missions and parade toddlers in dynamite belts. The same attitude probably also is in play when Muslim women, from Palestinians to the Chechen black widows, volunteer for suicide missions to avenge their husbands or brothers even though they may have small children at home and risk making them orphans of *both* parents. Speaking of orphans, the attack on the school in Beslan, southern Russia, where Chechen fighters held hostage and killed small children, infants and even pregnant women, reminds of the line, "He that hates you shall remain childless" (Sura 108:3).

Wine and Women

In view of the lavish descriptions of paradise found throughout the Koran (cf. Sura 4:57, 18:32, 22:23, 44:51, 52:23, 55:46, 56:15, 76:5, 76:17, 78:33, 83:20, 88:9), it would seem that life will be spent in virtue as a means of attaining the pleasures of the afterlife--wine, women and pretty boys.

... there shall wait on them young boys of their own as fair as virgin pearls.
- Sura 52:24

They shall recline on jewelled couches ... and there shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason) ... And theirs shall be dark-eyed houris, chaste as hidden pearls ...
- Sura 56:15

They shall be attended by boys graced with eternal youth, who to the beholder's eyes will seem like sprinkled pearls.
Sura 76:17

Reclining upon soft couches, they will gaze around them ... They shall drink of a pure wine, securely sealed, whose very dregs are musk (for this let all men emulously strive); a wine tempered with the waters of Tasnim, a spring at which the favored will refresh themselves.
- Sura 83:21

The notion of seventy-two virgins for each martyr has no basis in the Koran, which does promise virgins for every righteous Muslim man, but mentions no specific number.

It may be pointed out that the word *houri* derives from the Arabic *hur*, which is the plural form of companion, male as well as female (*ahwar* resp. *hawra*). While this allows the possibility of both female and male companions awaiting Muslim men in paradise, it surely does not imply anything of the sort for women. The passage "To dark-eyed houris We [Allah] shall wed them" (Sura 52:21) ought to make this evident, as the very notion of a woman having any male companion other than her husband--even (or especially) in paradise--should be quite inconceivable to the strongly patriarchal Muslims; and this definitely *is* about sex: The word "wed" and the passage "bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before" (Sura 55:56) leave no room for doubt.

It is curious, incidentally, that descriptions of the joys of paradise never include even such simple intellectual activities as games, let alone discussion, reading, writing, inventing or research. It seems that heaven does not provide for the basic needs of those endowed with intelligence and curiosity.

There they shall hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, but only the greeting, "Peace! Peace!"
- Sura 56:26

Prayer, worship and enjoyment of the simple pleasures is all that is expected of one. No thinking, please. By contrast, Rabbinical legend has it that in the Jewish heaven there are great shelves packed with books; and if a new, deserving book arrives, the others move a little closer together to make room for it. This also shows a tenderness of feeling which is utterly absent from the Koran.

Punchin' Judy

Although the Koran contains scattered references to women also being able to attain paradise, it is clearly a place for men.

To dark-eyed houris We [Allah] shall wed them.
- Sura 52:21

They shall dwell with bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before ... Virgins as fair as corals and rubies ... In each [of two heavenly gardens] there shall be virgins chaste and fair ... Dark-eyed virgins sheltered in their tents ... whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before.
- Sura 55:56,58,72,74

Theirs shall be gardens and vineyards, and high-bosomed maidens for companions: a truly overflowing cup.
- Sura 78:33

One wonders where this leaves the wife or wives a Muslim had in life. The Koran does say that "Together with their wives, they shall recline in shady groves upon soft couches" (Sura 36:56), but in view of many other, more extensive descriptions, this strikes as a cursory you-can-take-it-with-you remark. Women and their feelings are of no account; so much so that on May 14, 2004, calling women "the least protected member of the Muslim family," the Vatican took an unusually forward step when it warned Catholic women to think seriously before marrying a Muslim and urged Muslims to show more respect for human rights and gender equality. Domestic violence is rife in Muslim countries, and all of it sanctioned by the Koran.

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other ... Good women are obedient ... As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and ... beat them.
- Sura 4:34

It is no wonder that so many Muslim women wear a downcast expression, brought up as they are from childhood on to consider themselves inferior. (How can one be superior if both are essential?) Note also that a woman need not actually disobey her husband for him to beat her. His fear or suspicion are grounds enough. As the saying goes, a man should beat his wife at least once every day: If he doesn't know why he should, she surely will. Neither does it say in the Koran that a man should respect the woman's wishes if she does not feel like having sex. Women are treated as things and do not need to be asked. Indeed, the following passage could be read as encouraging rape.

Women are your fields: Go, then, into your fields as you please.
- Sura 2:223

The age for sexual consent for girls under sharia law, incidentally, is nine years. That's right: nine. The Koran does warn Muslims to "restrain their carnal desires (except with their wives and slave girls, for these are lawful to them ...)" (Suras 23:1, 70:24), but the emphasis is clearly on not trespassing on other men's property. Also along these lines, the Koran contains the provision, "You shall not force your slave girls into prostitution ... if they wish to preserve their chastity" (Sura 24:34). Rape of a slave girl by her owner is not prostitution, of course. It also appears that marriages of slaves need not be honored, not even those of Muslim slaves.

You are also forbidden to take in marriage married women except captives whom you own as slaves.
- Sura 4:24

Since non-Muslims are considered pagans and idolaters, Iran and other Muslim countries enforce a ban on marrying outside of the faith. This is stated in the Koran, which also urges Muslims to break an existing marriage to a non-Muslim.

You shall not wed pagan women unless they embrace the faith. A believing slave girl is

better than an idolatress, although she may please you. Nor shall you wed idolaters, unless they embrace the faith. A believing slave is better than an idolater, although he may please you. These call you to hellfire ...

- Sura 2:221

Do not hold on to your marriages with unbelieving women: Demand the dowries you have given them and let the infidels do the same.

- Sura 60:10

Many Muslim societies also require women to cover their hair, if not a great deal more. In the West, the controversial headscarf has become a religious symbol, yet this is not supported by the Koran, which leaves veiling up to local custom or eventually individual interpretation (both of which can change over time).

Enjoin believing women to ... cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed); to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women-servants, and their slave girls; male attendants lacking in natural vigor [eunuchs] and children who have no carnal knowledge of women.

- Sura 24:31

Whatever the local custom may be, there is no explicit mention in the Koran of either the headscarf or the head-to-toe burqa. It does not even mandate women to cover their hair. The only part of the female anatomy that is expressly mentioned is the bosoms, i.e., breasts. Other translations use a different term--"let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms"--but this is no more indicative of a headscarf or full dress, nor do these versions mention hair. If anything, the discrepancies would suggest that the original Arabic text is not very clear on this point.

Regarding adultery (i.e., heterosexual extramarital intercourse), the standard punishment is a hundred lashes in public for both men and women, yet homosexual extramarital diversion may go unpunished.

The adulterer and the adulteress shall each be given a hundred lashes ... and let their punishment be witnessed by a number of believers.

- Sura 24:2

If two men amongst you commit indecency, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, let them be.

- Sura 4:16

While it mandates public flogging, the Koran does not mandate stoning to death, not for adultery nor for any other offense. (It does, though, mandate cutting off hands for stealing: As for the man or woman who is guilty of theft, cut off their hands to punish them for their crimes. - Sura 5:38)

As for bearing witness in legal matters, the word of a man always outweighs that of a woman.

Call in two male witnesses from among you, but if two cannot be found, then one man and two women whom you judge fit to act as witnesses; so that if either of them commit an error, the other will remember.

- Sura 2:282

Clearly, the word of a man weighs as much as that of two women. The provision "that if either of them commit an error, the other will remember" obviously applies only to female witnesses, once again revealing the deep-seated gender bias of the implicit assumption that women are less reliable and trustworthy than men.

Moving on to child nutrition for a moment, it is interesting that the Koran leaves it up to the man if and for how long breast-feeding of an infant should be continued.

Mothers shall give suck to their children for two whole years if the father wishes the sucking to be completed.

- Sura 2:233

Note that interrupting breast-feeding early without proper substitution can amount to killing the child by starvation. This commandment ties in with--and effectively sanctions--the practice of baby girl infanticide that was rife in ancient Arabia.

Not surprisingly, Islam lacks strong female figures and role models like the Virgin Mary and the many female saints and heroines of Christianity. Instead, the Koran contains an admonition against worshipping goddesses.

The pagans pray to females: They pray to a rebellious Satan.

- Sura 4:117

Although this passage refers to pre-Islamic female deities such as al-Lat, al-Uzzah and al-Manat (Sun, Venus resp. Fortune, regarded as the daughters of Allah, the supreme Semitic god in pre-Islamic Arabia), it is easily generalized to apply to other religions (e.g., Christianity, Hinduism) as well as anything touching on feminism, women's rights or gender equality, which conservative Muslims categorically reject as anti-Islamic.

The Compassionate, the Merciful

All but one of the Koran's 114 Suras begin with the phrase, "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." (The exception is Sura 9, which traditional commentators regard as a continuation of Sura 8.) The quote appears within many Suras as well, together with other quotes along similar lines; e.g., "He is wise and all-knowing; He is the Mighty, the Forgiving One"; etc. Yet one cannot help but wonder what is so compassionate, so merciful and so forgiving about a god that decides who will believe and who will not, and then punishes those whom He chooses to make unbelievers.

You cannot help a man if Allah seeks to mislead him. Those whose hearts He does not please to purify shall be rewarded with disgrace in this world and a grievous punishment in the next.

- Sura 5:41

Had your Lord pleased, all the people of the earth would have believed in Him. Would you then force faith upon men? None can have faith except by the will of Allah.

- Sura 10:99

Allah will not guide those whom He misleads. There shall be none to help them ... He [Allah] leaves in error whom He will and gives guidance to whom He pleases. You shall be questioned about all your actions.

- Sura 16:38,93

When you recite the Koran, We [Allah] place between you and those who deny the life to come a hidden barrier. We [Allah] cast a veil upon their hearts and make them hard of hearing, lest they understand it.

- Sura 17:45

... who can guide those whom Allah has led astray? There shall be none to help them.

- Sura 30:30

Allah misleads whom He will and guides whom He pleases.

- Sura 74:31

Hell will lie in ambush, a home for the transgressors. There they shall abide long ages; there they shall taste neither refreshment nor any drink, save boiling water and decaying filth: a fitting recompense.

- Sura 78: 21-26

On that day there shall be downcast faces, of men broken and worn out, drinking from a seething fountain. Their only food shall be bitter thorns, which will neither sustain them nor satisfy their hunger.

- Sura 88:2-7

All actions being thus predetermined, making converts is not even a token exercise in showing one's allegiance. Likewise, all warnings for unbelievers to take heed are formalities--and any charges of poor judgement leveled at unbelievers would lay the blame upon Allah's door since it was He who dictated their unbelief. Yet even this contradiction is used as an argument to cow the believer.

It is He who has revealed to you the Koran. Some of its verses are precise in meaning--they are the foundations of the Book--and others are ambiguous. Those whose hearts are infected with disbelief will follow the ambiguous part, so as to create dissension by seeking to explain it. But no-one knows its meaning except Allah. Those who are well-grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in it: It is all from our Lord." But only the wise take heed.

*Lord, do not cause our
hearts to go astray*

after You have guided

us. [emphasis mine]

- Sura 3:6-9

After reading the above passages, and they are by far not the only ones, one must conclude that Allah is a cruel god who toys with believers and unbelievers alike. Such arbitrariness is not good by any standard; and if we now go on to say that good and evil as we see them do not apply to Allah, then good and evil lose all meaning.

Even in the Koran, the implicit premise is that people have free will to choose for themselves. If our actions are predestined, then whatever one does would have happened anyway and there is no point in striving. Obviously, a religion which openly proposed a cruel deity and predetermination of belief and unbelief would strike as pointless and not attract many followers. Yet this is the message that stands out from the passages above as well as many others in the Koran.

Looking Back

Beware of new things, for every new thing is an innovation and every innovation a mistake.

- Sayings of the Prophet

Muslim countries are "the poorest, the most illiterate and the most backwards" on the planet, as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak pointed out during an address to the Arab League following the terrorist air strikes at New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. The cause for the state in which most Muslim countries find themselves lies not so much in their having been Western colonies, as is often claimed, but in the stifling religiosity whereby a clerical establishment enamored with the past resists change and isolates them from the rest of the world.

The example of theocracy in the extreme was provided by the former Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, who despised learning and the arts, opposed innovation and idealized the 10th-century religious hermit life. Just as the saying attributed to Mohamed really concerns matters of worship but can be extended to every aspect of life, the Taliban enforced the Koran to the letter. Even failure to constantly utter the standard reservation *inshallah* [so God willing] was considered a transgression. (Do not say of anything, "I will do it tomorrow," without adding: "If Allah wills." - Sura 18:23)

The lesson in their short period of misrule was simple and clear: Placing excessive emphasis on religion is detrimental to the economy, the infrastructure, and society itself. With the standard knee-jerk reaction of branding non-Islamic ideas as evil and corrupting, by refusing to entertain any deeper discussion on sensitive subjects and their readiness to quiet criticism by violence, Muslims isolate

themselves and look back rather than forward.

Shehu Usman Dan Fodo, a 19th-century Islamic scholar from northern Nigeria, said: "A kingdom can endure with unbelief, but it cannot endure with injustice." A culture which discriminates half of its followers (women) and essentially dehumanizes the rest of the world--Muslims are the only real human beings--can only last in isolation, without comparison to other cultures. However, isolation is becoming increasingly rare in the Information Age.

There are clear parallels to the history of Europe, which did not make headway until it secularized itself. There also are parallels between the conflict of the Islamic world with the West (particularly the USA) and that of the Celtic world with Rome. Rome conquered first Gaul and then the rest of the Celtic world to put a stop to the repeated Gaulish incursions. The conquest was made final when Rome broke the back of the Celtic world by killing the druids. Without them to hold it together culturally, the Celtic world broke up and its fragments drifted apart. A similar cultural disintegration has been underway in the Islamic world for centuries. The first cracks appeared when the religion was exported from Arabia, the schism between Sunni and Shiah Muslims drove a deep wedge into the *umma* (the community of believers), and differences continued to mount as Islam spread as far as Indonesia and Tanzania. Gradually, the Islamic world stagnated and fell behind scientifically and militarily, all of which contributed to giving it an identity. Today, the only identity which Islamic cultures have left is religion. The radicalization we are seeing now is symptomatic of a culture trying to stem the tide of change and prevent the inevitable long-term emasculation of Muslim societies as patriarchy everywhere comes to an end, and societies are founded less on authority and more on knowledge.

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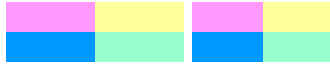
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